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TEACHING NOTE

Yes, We Can Make a Difference: BSU Alumni Light the Way for Service Learning

MaryBeth Tobin

A few years ago, I was sitting in a class learning about the *American Taxpayer Relief Act* of 2012, when it dawned on me how boring it may be for many students to learn about tax. The Internal Revenue Code is a 75,000-page listing of rules and regulations. What a tedious task to learn the tax code. As a tax educator, how could I possibly make it more interesting and inspiring for students? After a few semi-successful attempts, two Bridgewater State alumni asked me to volunteer on a project that triggered for me an “Aha moment.”

Many colleges and universities pride themselves on graduating civically minded individuals. Formal education provides a wonderful platform for introducing students to the concept of civic engagement with both teaching strategies and co-curricular activities. One such teaching strategy is “service-learning,” which integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. Faculty members at Bridgewater State (BSU) have been teaching service-learning courses for many years and we now have 20 unique service-learning-designated courses spanning a wide variety of disciplines and benefiting hundreds of BSU students and community partners.

In his keynote address at the National Outreach Scholarship Convention at the University of Alabama in 2012, former U.S. Ambassador to South Africa and Duke University professor James A. Joseph spoke about educational commitment to civic engagement. Throughout his address, Professor

Joseph referred to “values that build community” and challenged universities, to find ways to identify them. “The moral imperative of civic engagement,” he stated, “is to help transform the laissez-faire notion of live and let live to the principle of live and help live ... One of the missions of universities is to put knowledge at the service of society, [to tie] ... academic incentives to community outreach. If civic engagement is an important university priority, there needs to be both guidelines and incentives that reflect what the university ... claims as its values.” BSU is rising to the challenge.

My “Aha moment” resulted in the development of a service-learning course entitled *Nonprofit Administration*. This course was offered during the summers of 2014 and 2015. During this time, students enrolled in the class volunteered more than 160 hours of community service to 16 different nonprofit organizations located in the region. However, it is not just the community partners who benefit from

service-learning courses. There are three stakeholders who are integral to the success of a service-learning experience. Students, community partners and faculty work together to ensure that each stakeholder is achieving the intended beneficial outcomes. If the strategy is successful, each stakeholder will benefit greatly from the experience.

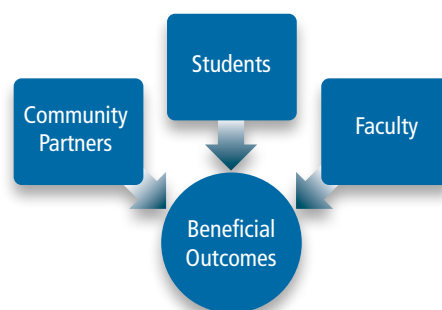


Figure 1: Service-Learning Stakeholders

Benefits for Students

By surveying students, I learned that they profit in a variety of ways that include academic, professional and personal benefits. The most important academic benefit is increased understanding of course content by providing students with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in a nonacademic environment. The opportunity to speak to individuals outside the classroom and campus setting helps students to enhance their communication, collaboration and leadership skills. Students are assisting organizations and community leaders with operational and strategic decision making on a real-time basis – an experience that contributes to the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Megan Fyfe, a student in the *Nonprofit* course, noted that “civic engagement through service learning edges students out of their comfort zone and ... requires them to adapt to changes in their environment.”

Service-learning projects enable students to gain hands-on experience that can be included on their resumes and

discussed during job interviews. Many of the students in the *Nonprofit* course were excited to share their volunteer experiences with a current or prospective employer. Working directly with community and organizational leaders also allows students to expand their professional networks. BSU student Melanie Dean writes: “service-learning ... helps us to work on our communication and research skills while developing relationships with our nonprofit organization. Employers love to see employees or potential employees that are comfortable in social situations and can present themselves well.”

Much has been written about the younger generation’s desire to work in environments that allow them to have an impact. Service-learning projects can provide students with opportunities to explore and inform these values and chart a course for making a difference. Engagement in the community contributes to student understanding and appreciation of our region’s diverse communities and cultures. BSU student, Leeanne Serpa, offered that “taking a course with a service-learning component has allowed me to consider the importance of being an engaged citizen ... if every college student participated in at least one service-learning class ... the impact could be monumental. Sometimes all an individual needs is a push in the right direction to achieve great things.”

Benefits for Community Partners

Service-learning would not be possible without the generosity of the many community partners who agree to work with our students. In exchange for their partnership, many benefits inure to the community organizations and leaders, including the opportunity to communicate their missions and expand their outreach. Working with the university and its students can increase public support and visibility for an organization or community leader. Student volunteers can inject new

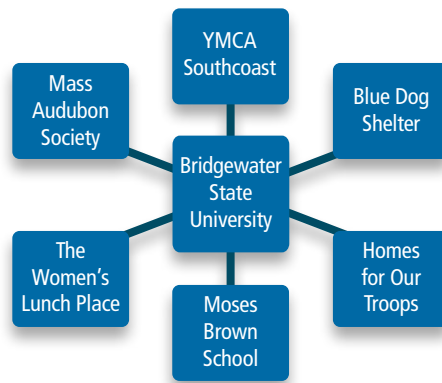


Figure 2: Examples of Community Partners from Nonprofit Administration

energy, offer new ideas, develop new resources or simply generate enthusiasm around an organization’s current programming. Students will expand capacity and add resources that may not have otherwise been available to the organization. Community partners can cultivate this engagement in a new generation of volunteers as many of the students engaged in service-learning continue to work with their organizations beyond the requirements of the course. BSU student Scott Burgess shared that “I had been thinking about volunteering ... so this class really jump started that for me. I am giving my time to an organization I feel strongly about and plan to continue after the class is finished.”

Benefits for Faculty

For faculty members who develop and teach service-learning courses, the benefits include professional development and personal growth. Professional development opportunities include compiling a distinguished teaching portfolio, advancing scholarship relative to service learning and providing community service. Volunteering with community organizations and/or facilitating a service-learning experience can often be an incredible amount of work. However, for me and my service-learning colleagues, the personal rewards are worth it both as educators and professionals in the

discipline. No reward is greater than hearing a student claim that he/she got so much more out of the experience than anticipated.

Developing a Service-Learning Course

The process of creating a service-learning course is unique to each faculty member and takes time to evolve. There needs to be an authentic connection between the course content and the community engagement. This connection may arise from a faculty member’s passion for the content, enthusiasm for civic engagement or a simple task that creates the “Aha moment.” I was introduced to service learning at BSU’s faculty orientation, the very first day I arrived on campus five years ago. I was impressed by the faculty members engaged in service learning and quickly became interested in exploring this teaching strategy. However, I had difficulty visualizing a connection between service learning and the accounting and tax courses that I teach. That vision began to crystalize while I was volunteering on a project to assist the start-up of a local nonprofit organization.

As a Certified Public Accountant, I have volunteered with numerous nonprofits over the years to assist them in business formation, incorporation and the preparation of bylaws and various other documentation required to apply for tax-exempt status. However, this initial administrative hurdle is just the beginning as most nonprofits must comply with a mountain of state and federal regulations and file annual forms attesting to such compliance in order to maintain their tax-exempt status each year. Tending to the administrative requirements for nonprofit organizations requires a specialized skill set. Nonprofits need volunteers and employees with the education and training necessary to understand these requirements and to assist the organizations with compliance.

The inspiration for my *Nonprofit Administration* course came while working with Susan Moss ('71) and James Daley ('76) on the start-up of Panther Pride Athletic Foundation (PPAF). After 36-year careers as teachers, coaches and administrators at Whitman-Hanson Regional High School (W-H), Susan and James are still contributing to the W-H community as leaders of the PPAF nonprofit organization. PPAF's mission is to grant financial support to W-H athletic programs that demonstrate a need for funding beyond school district funding. Although all active W-H athletic teams/programs are eligible to receive grant awards, PPAF prioritizes female student-athletes to ensure that their sports are level-funded with their male counterparts. While volunteering on this start-up project, it dawned on me what a great experience this would be for our BSU students—both business students and non-business students interested in nonprofit administration. I became interested in developing a course that focuses on nonprofit organizations and the plethora of tax-exempt regulations they must follow to obtain and maintain tax-exemption.

My objective in developing the course was to achieve three student-centric goals: exposing our business students to careers in the nonprofit sector; encouraging the participation of non-business students who may not be interested in studying corporate business principles, but are interested in learning about the business aspects of nonprofit organizations; and exposing all students to volunteer opportunities and encouraging civic engagement at an early stage of their post-collegiate careers. I was interested in developing a course that had the students engaging directly with nonprofit organizations in the regional community.

Knowing that I would need assistance in developing the course, I attended BSU's Teacher-Scholar Institute, an

annual week-long intensive professional development event where faculty come together to collaborate on teaching and writing projects. This program allowed me to collaborate with colleagues across all disciplines who had already implemented service-learning in their courses or were interested in doing so. I learned different teaching philosophies and styles and developed ideas for contextualizing the content of my proposed course in order to enhance its appeal to a broader base of student interests. For example, my initial thoughts for the course included tax-exempt rules and regulations as the centerpiece with service-learning to be used as complementary "packaging." Collaboration with colleagues helped me to reframe my thinking to encourage greater participation from students with various experiences and interests. We discussed minor changes such as the course title (*Tax-Exempt* vs. *Nonprofit*) and the type of course offering (special topics, elective, core curriculum, etc). We also discussed major changes such as assessment (proficiency testing vs. reflective writing and journaling) and how to deliver course content so as to anchor service learning within nonprofit instruction.

The service-learning component of the course requires students to engage with a nonprofit organization (volunteer, interview administrators, invite guest speakers, etc.) and then reflect on that engagement relative to their initial thoughts on civic engagement and nonprofit administration. Instead of simply pushing course content in the direction of the students and hoping for an outcome; my goal is to foster that outcome by asking students to share their various experiences in the nonprofit sector, enhance their knowledge through peer perspective, and encourage the continuation of community engagement even after course completion. This *Nonprofit* course is now offered by BSU's Accounting and Finance Department each summer and owes its inspiration

to the two Bridgewater State alumni whose passion for and continued commitment to their community inspired me to share their story with BSU students.

There is a common thread that weaves its way through the community service of BSU's students, faculty, administrators and alumni who are engaged in service-learning and civic engagement. That common thread is BSU's value statement and the institution's commitment to the community that it serves: "Not to be ministered unto, but to minister." Community engagement is a value that has been pervasive at Bridgewater State for many years and the university community should be proud of the many civically minded students it graduates and the civically minded faculty and administrators it employs. The many service-learning courses offered at BSU help to continue that cycle. In his 1968 sermon to the congregation of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King Jr. preached that "greatness comes from service." This sermon has since been paraphrased into a famous Dr. King quote: "Not everybody can be famous, but everybody can be great because greatness is determined by service." In that spirit, we all have an opportunity to be great. Maybe it's a course, an experience, or a simple gesture that inspires you; but if you keep an open mind, something or someone may just light the way.



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